Election Watch for the Digital Age

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Preelection assessment

Presidential election set for April 2021

President Idriss Déby Itno is running for a sixth term in office in a tightly controlled political environment. His Patriotic Salvation Movement (MPS) and allied parties control the National Assembly; members of the body have not faced an election since 2011 due to repeated postponements. Though opposition parties are legally permitted, their leaders face legal and physical harassment for their political organizing. Over a dozen candidates will contest the election, including opposition leader Saleh Kebzabo and Theophile Bebzoune Bongoro, who has the backing of Alliance Victoire, a new coalition comprising 15 opposition parties.

Constitutional reforms passed in December included the creation of a vice president position appointed directly by the president, as well as formation of a second legislative chamber elected by provincial and municipal councilors. The opposition was largely excluded from the reform process, and the changes are widely viewed as a further entrenchment of power by the Déby and his allies. In February 2021, authorities placed a ban on public demonstrations and arrested numerous activists and opposition members who defied the measure in the following days. The government tightly controls the media environment, and members of the media self-censor to avoid reprisals. Access to information is further limited by low internet penetration and high illiteracy rates. Despite these obstacles, the internet remains an important avenue for access to information, making it a target for government interference.

Freedom House has identified the following as key digital interference issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Blocking websites and social media:** The Chadian government has a history of restricting access to online content surrounding politically consequential events. Beginning on July 22, 2020, authorities blocked WhatsApp for at least two months in an apparent attempt to prevent the circulation of images and videos of extrajudicial violence between a member of the Chadian military and civilians at an N'Djamena market. A 15-month social media blackout began in March 2018, affecting WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other platforms. While authorities justified the blocking on security concerns, its implementation coincided with tensions surrounding constitutional reforms that allow Déby to serve additional terms as president. The 2016 presidential election also saw largescale blocking of social media, messaging apps, and several websites.
- **Internet shutdowns:** The 2021 presidential election brings an increased risk of connectivity restrictions. The internet was inaccessible for eight months following the 2016 presidential elections and has been disrupted several times since then. More recently, the internet was

throttled or inaccessible in many parts of the country from July 22 through August 18, 2020, coinciding with the blocking of WhatsApp.

- **Arrests and prosecutions:** Individuals are often punished for critical online commentary about the government. In January, a journalist was fined and sentenced to prison on defamation charges after criticizing a local judicial system in a Facebook post. In addition to defamation, Chadian laws criminalize the publishing of "outrages" against government institutions or their members; disseminating information in violation of national security interests; and praising or provoking terrorist acts, with especially harsh punishment reserved for internet-related offenses. The vague nature of these laws makes them particularly vulnerable to abuse, including politicized application to critics, members of the media, and opposition figures. For example, in February the head of the Chadian Organization for Human Rights received a three-year prison sentence and a fine for "violation of the constitutional order" in relation to a Facebook post about Déby's allegedly ill health.

Chad has a score of 30 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects a restricted digital sphere, an uncompetitive electoral environment, and the regular violation of a range of human rights. The country is rated **Not Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020,* with a score of 17 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Chad country report in *[Freedom in the World](#)*.